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8-How to Cite Sources
Citation and Citation Styles

Sources that influenced your thinking and research must be cited in academic writing.

Citing sources is an academic convention for keeping track of which sources influenced your own thinking and research. (See Ethical Use of Sources for many good reasons why you should cite others' work.)

Most citations require two parts:

- The full bibliographic citation on the Bibliography page or References page, or Works Cited page of your final product.
- An indication within your text (usually author and publication date and maybe the page number from which you are quoting) that tells your reader where you have used something that needs a citation.

With your in-text citation, your reader will be able to tell which full bibliographic citation you are referring to by paying attention to the author’s name and publication date.

Let’s look at an example.
EXAMPLE: Citations in Academic Writing

Here’s a citation in the text of an academic paper:

Studies have shown that compared to passive learning, which occurs when students observe a lecture, students will learn more and will retain that learning longer if more active methods of teaching and learning are used (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Fink 2003).

The information in parentheses coordinates with a list of full citations at the end of the paper.

At the end of the paper, these bibliographic entries appear in a reference list:


You can see the full article [OSU login required] from which this example was taken online.

Citation Styles

Style guides set the specific rules for how to create both in-text citations and their full bibliographic citations.

There are over a dozen kinds of citation styles. While each style requires much of the same publication information to be included in a citation, the styles differ from each other in formatting details such as capitalization, punctuation, order of publication information, and whether the author’s name is given in full or abbreviated.

EXAMPLE: Differences in Citation Styles

The image below shows bibliographic citations in four common styles. Notice that they contain information about who the author is, article title, journal title, publication year, and information about volume, issue, and pages. Notice also the small differences in punctuation, order of the elements, and formatting that do make a difference.
Differences between citation practices occur mainly in formatting.

Compare citation elements (including the punctuation and spacing) in the same color to see how each style handles their information.
Steps for Citing

To write a proper citation we recommend following these steps, which will help you maintain accuracy and clarity in acknowledging sources.

Step 1: Choose Your Citation Style

Find out the name of the citation style you must use from your instructor, the directions for an assignment, or what you know your audience or publisher expects. Then search for your style at the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) or use Google or Bing to find your style’s stylebook/handbook and then purchase it or ask for it at a library.

Step 2: Create In-Text Citations

Find and read your style’s rules about in-text citations, which are usually very thorough. Luckily, there are usually examples provided that make it a lot easier to learn the rules.

EXAMPLE: Style Guides Are Usually Very Thorough

For instance, your style guide may have different rules for when you are citing:

- Quotations rather than summaries rather than paraphrases
- Long, as opposed to short, quotations.
- Sources with one or multiple authors.
- Books, journal articles, interviews and email, or electronic sources.

Step 3: Determine the Kind of Source

After creating your in-text citation, now begin creating the full bibliographic citation that will appear on the References or Bibliography page by deciding what kind of source you have to cite (book, film, journal article, webpage, etc.).
EXAMPLE: Using a Style Guide to Create an In-Text Citation

Imagine that you’re using APA style and have the APA style guide rules for in-text citations open in OWL. In your psychogeography paper, you want to quote the authors of the book The Experience of Nature, Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, which was published in 1989. What you want to quote is from page 38 of the book.

Here’s what you want to quote:

“The way space is organized provides information about what one might want to do in that space. A relatively brief glance at a scene communicates whether there is room to roam, whether one’s path is clear or blocked.”

1. Skim the headings in the style guide to remind yourself of what its rules concern. Since it has rules about the length of quotations, you count the number of words in what you want to quote and find that your quote has 38, which is within the range for short quotations (less than 40), according to the APA style guide. According to the rule for short quotations, you see that you’re supposed to introduce the quote by attributing the quote to the author (last name only) and adding the publication date in parentheses. You write:

According to the Kaplans (1989), “The way space is organized provides information about what one might want to do in that space. A relatively brief glance at a scene communicates whether there is room to roam, whether one’s path is clear or blocked.”

2. Then you notice that the example in the style guide includes the page number on which you found the quotation. It appears at the end of the quote (in parentheses and outside the quote marks but before the period ending the quotation). So you add that:

According to the Kaplans (1989), “The way space is organized provides information about what one might want to do in that space. A relatively brief glance at a scene communicates whether there is room to roam, whether one’s path is clear or blocked” (p.38).

3. You’re feeling pretty good, but then you realize that you have overlooked the rule about having multiple authors. You have two and their last names are both Kaplan. So you change your sentence to:

According to Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), “The way space is organized provides information about what one might want to do in that space. A relatively brief glance at a scene communicates whether there is room to roam, whether one’s path is clear or blocked” (p.38).

So you have your first in-text citation for your final product:

According to Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), “The way space is organized provides information
about what one might want to do in that space. A relatively brief glance at a scene communicates whether there is room to roam, whether one’s path is clear or blocked” (p.38).

Step 4: Study Your Style’s Rules for Bibliographic Citations

Next, you’ll need a full bibliographic citation for the same source. This citation will appear on the References page or Bibliography page or Works Cited page. (APA style, which we’re using here, requires a page called References.) Bibliographic citations usually contain more publication facts than you used for your in-text citation, and the formatting for all of them is very specific.

EXAMPLE: Bibliographic Citation Rules Are Very Specific

- Rules vary for sources, depending, for instance, on whether they are books, journal articles, or online sources.
- Sometimes lines of the citation must be indented.
- Authors’ names usually appear last name first.
- Authors’ first names of authors may be initials instead.
- Names of sources may or may not have to be in full.
- Names of some kinds of sources may have to be italicized.
- Names of some sources may have to be in quotes.
- Dates of publication appear in different places, depending on the style.
- Some styles require Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) in the citations for online sources.

Step 5: Identify Citation Elements

Figure out which bibliographic citation rules apply to the source you’ve just created an in-text citation for. Then apply them to create your first bibliographic citation.

EXAMPLE: Using a Style Guide to Create a Bibliographic Citation

Imagine that you’re using APA style and have the APA style guide rules for bibliographic citations open in OWL. Your citation will be for the book called The Experience of Nature, written by Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan and published in 1989.

1. You start by trying to apply OWL’s basic rules of APA style, which tell you your citation
will start with the last name of your author followed by his or her first initial, and that the second line of the citation will be indented. So you write: **Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S.**

2. Since you have two authors, you look for a rule regarding that situation, which requires a comma between the authors and an ampersand between the names. So you write: Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S.

3. Because you know your source is a book, you look for style guide rules and examples about books. For instance, the rules for APA style say that the publication date goes in parentheses, followed by a period after the last author’s name. And that the title of the book is italicized. You apply the rules and examples and write the publication information you know about your source: Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). The Experience of Nature.

4. Next, you look at the rules and examples of book citations and notice that they show the city where the book was published and the publisher. So you find that information about your source (in a book, usually on the title page or its back) and write: Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). The Experience of Nature. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

5. Congratulations, especially about remembering to indent that line! You have created the first bibliographic citation for your final product.

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**Step 6: Repeat the steps for creating an in-text citation and a bibliographic citation for each of your sources.**

Create your bibliographic citation by arranging publication information to match the example you chose in Step 4. Pay particular attention to what is and is not capitalized and to what punctuation and spaces separate each part that the example illustrates.

**MOVIE: Finding the Information You Need: PDF and HTML Journal Articles**

*View video*

**MOVIE: Finding the Information You Need: Citing Information for Web and Online Multimedia Sources**

*View video*
TIP: Citation Software

If you like, you can use citation generator software to arrange the information needed for your citation according to the style guide you chose. Learn more later in this section.

ACTIVITY: Deciphering Citations

Open activity in a web browser.
Citation Software

You may be familiar with the many citation generators that allow you to auto-generate reference lists from citation data. Some allow you to save and store citations to reuse them in different lists and in different work, as needed.

Such tools are worth investigating and learning about for any long-term research project. Zotero is online and available for free to anyone from anywhere. RefWorks and EndNote are available to all OSU students, faculty, and staff from anywhere because OSU Libraries subscribes to this service. For information about using any of these tools, go to software available to OSU students.

Common Citations Tools

Good reasons to use citation generation software include:

• To save time: it takes citation generation software only a few seconds to create a citation.
• To easily convert citations from one style to another.
• To have a centralized source list that is not attached to a specific project, which allows you to reuse references and their citations in various projects.

Care you must use with citation generation software includes:

• Citation generation software is only as good as the information entered into it. In other words, if you provide incorrect information or do not include some information, then your citation will be incorrect.
• Most citation generation software can create citations by searching for the information online. Sometimes software can pull the information from the wrong edition of a source, for example, or specific formatting (such as italics) might be lost. Or perhaps the generator didn’t use the latest version of the style guide.
• Always review the citations you create with this software.
When to Cite

Citing sources is often described as a straightforward, rule-based practice. But in fact, there are many gray areas around citation, and learning how to apply citation guidelines takes practice and education. If you are confused by it, you are not alone – in fact you might be doing some good thinking. Here are some guidelines to help you navigate citation practices.

Cite when you are directly quoting. This is the easiest rule to understand. If you are stating word-for-word what someone else has already written, you must put quotes around those words and you must give credit to the original author. Not doing so would mean that you are letting your reader believe these words are your own and represent your own effort.

Cite when you are summarizing and paraphrasing. This is a trickier area to understand. First of all, summarizing and paraphrasing are two related practices but they are not the same. Summarizing is when you read a text, consider the main points, and provide a shorter version of what you learned. Paraphrasing is when you restate what the original author said in your own words and in your own tone. Both summarizing and paraphrasing require good writing skills and an accurate understanding of the material you are trying to convey. Summarizing and paraphrasing are difficult to do when you are a beginning academic researcher, but these skills become easier to perform over time with practice.

Cite when you are citing something that is highly debatable. For example, if you want to claim that the Patriot Act has been an important tool for national security, you should be prepared to give examples of how it has helped and how experts have claimed that it has helped. Many U.S. citizens concerned that it violates privacy rights won’t agree with you, and they will be able to find commentary that the Patriot Act has been more harmful to the nation than helpful. You need to be prepared to show such skeptics that you have experts on your side, too.

TIP: Why Cite Sources?

This section covers how and when to cite sources. For a discussion of why to cite sources, see Ethical Use of Sources.

When Don’t You Cite?

Don’t cite when what you are saying is your own insight. As you learned in The Purpose of Academic Argument, research involves forming opinions and insights around what you learn. You may be citing several sources that have helped you learn, but at some point you must integrate your own opinion, conclusion, or insight into the work. The fact that you are not citing it helps the reader understand that this portion of the work is your unique contribution developed through your own research efforts.

Don’t cite when you are stating common knowledge. What is common knowledge is sometimes
difficult to discern. In general, quick facts like historical dates or events are not cited because they are common knowledge.

Examples of information that would not need to be cited include:

- The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.
- Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States in January, 2009.

Some quick facts, such as statistics, are trickier. For example, the number of gun-related deaths per year probably should be cited, because there are a lot of ways this number could be determined (does the number include murder only, or suicides and accidents, as well?) and there might be different numbers provided by different organizations, each with an agenda about gun laws.

A guideline that can help with deciding whether or not to cite facts is to determine whether the same data is repeated in multiple sources. If it is not, it is best to cite.

The other thing that makes this determination difficult might be that what seems new and insightful to you might be common knowledge to an expert in the field. You have to use your best judgment, and probably err on the side of over-citing, as you are learning to do academic research. You can seek the advice of your instructor, a writing tutor, or a librarian. Knowing what is and is not common knowledge is a practiced skill that gets easier with time and with your own increased knowledge.

**TIP: Why You Can’t Cite Wikipedia**

You’ve likely been told at some point that you can’t cite Wikipedia, or any encyclopedia for that matter, in your scholarly work.

The reason is that such entries are meant to prepare you to do research, not be evidence of your having done it. Wikipedia entries, which are tertiary sources, are already a summary of what is known about the topic. Someone else has already done the labor of synthesizing lots of information into a concise and quick way of learning about the topic.

So while Wikipedia is a great shortcut for getting context, background, and a quick lesson on topics that might not be familiar to you, don’t quote, paraphrase, or summarize from it. Just use it to educate yourself.

**ACTIVITY: To Cite or Not to Cite?**

Open activity in a web browser.